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SUBJECT: TAJIK ELECTIONS: MONITORS TO BE DEPLOYED, BUT OBSERVERS  
PESSIMISTIC

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11. (SBU) USAID, the European Commission (EC), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) are funding election observation, party training, and voter education projects for the February 28 elections to the Tajik lower house of parliament (Majlisi Namoyandagon). USAID implementing partner International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) will train political parties, educate voters, and organize political debates for broadcast on television or radio, pending agreement by state media to air the programming. The EC is funding a Tajik NGO, the National Association of Political Scientists, to train and deploy 800 Tajik observers throughout the country. The OSCE will deploy 150 international election monitors from member states. A logistical team from OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) is already in Dushanbe making arrangements for these monitors; additional ODIHR staff will arrive in mid-late January.

12. (SBU) Though President Rahmon has repeatedly pledged to be the "guarantor" of honest elections, observers are pessimistic about the prospects of free and fair polls. "If the monitors ask even a clever question, they can be kicked out of the polling station," according to OSCE Senior Elections Reform Officer Rossitza Kamenova. The Tajik Central Election Committee (Ref B) advised local election commissions that monitors must sit at least eight meters from the location where votes are counted. They are not able to view vote counting and do not have access to ballots to check vote counts. Kamenova noted that, generally, local election commissions are comprised of low-level government employees, such as school teachers. These commissions, which count votes and issue vote totals, are susceptible to pressure from government officials.

13. (SBU) "Nobody expects free and fair elections," reports IFES Chief of Party, Michael Getto. The long-term goal of elections programming, according to Getto, is to plant seeds for future democratic development by raising public awareness and facilitating party development. Additional challenges to free and fair elections include inaccessible polling places during the Tajik winter and confusing ballot procedures. Voters will receive a different ballot for each of the races (village/city council, district council, provincial parliament, and national parliament) and are required to scratch out every listed candidate except the candidate they are voting for, according to Kamenova.

14. (SBU) The Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT), the only opposition party to criticize the President's administration actively faces a state media blackout and mild government harassment. Local officials in the Gorno-Badakhshan

Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) threatened to fire two government employees intending to register as representatives of an SDPT candidate planning to contest an individual mandate seat, according to Deputy Chairman Amniyat Abdunazarov. Under Tajik law, candidates are required to register official representatives. As replacements, the SDPT candidate found two unemployed individuals willing to register. The SDPT continues to face a state media blackout; national television stations aired brief footage of every political party congress except that of the SDPT. "There are four parties that don't even exist, but they get on television, while we can't!" Abdunazarov complained.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: Election observers, party training, and voter education will raise public awareness of the democratic process, but we agree that, despite the President's blandishments, the February 28 elections are shaping up to be another state-managed affair. While the SDPT rightly complains about unfair treatment by the government and state press, it has no strategy to rally voter support and likely will remain unrepresented in the parliament. END COMMENT

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